



# SUBVERSIONS IN AMITAV GHOSH'S THE SHADOW LINES

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## ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* presents the complexities of post-colonial and postmodern world and had shown subversions in the novel for certain notions deeply ingrained in the cultural, psychological and historical realities. The arbitrarily drawn national boundaries creating divisions and violence, the shadow lines between fact and fiction, the historical truth and lived realities and personal memories, freedom and bondage are explored with a keen and sensitive eye. The idea of nationalism, personal freedom, historical facts, riots- their reasons and consequences, mortality, the unity of experience are dexterously woven together in the novel.

**KEYWORDS:** Nationalism, Imagination, Borders, Riots, Freedom, Violence, History.

## INTRODUCTION:

Amitav Ghosh, a talented, innovative, experimentalist novelist of contemporary India writing in English holds a distinctive place amongst the Postcolonial writers. Immensely influenced by the political and social milieu of the country and the stories of freedom struggle and partition he heard in childhood, he is an indefatigable researcher trying to go the roots of the truth. The shadow lines a novel questioning received history and many other notions of so-called truths depicts the same zeal of the novelist to unearth the reality.

The Indian English novel from its conception to its most flourishing times during the freedom struggle attempted to show the nationalist upsurge that stirred the whole country on an unprecedented scale. The great mass awakening under the leadership of Gandhiji and all-pervading national consciousness facilitated the assumption of a distinctive national identity after the independence. At the same time the great disruptive force of the continuing growth of Muslim separatism was emerging culminating in the creation of Pakistan in 1947. The spectacle of hundreds of women, men, strong young boys and girls as well as children taking part in political mass movements, picketing of liquor shops, marching in demonstrations, courting jails, facing lathi charges and bullets are mirrored in the novels of Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Manohar Malgonkar, Khushwant Singh and Nayantara Sehgal. All describing the aspirations of millions to get a free nation.

As Sameswar Sati opines "with coming of independence such a homogenising narrative shaped by the impulses of nationalism and colonialism begins to fizzle out and by the time we reach Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children* 1981, the national idea begins to be restructured and subverted"<sup>1</sup>.

Now as Neerchandoke says "and the narrative of the nation that was lovingly and carefully build through in the struggle against colonialism, and that constituted much of the immediate postcolonial generation-my generation appears to be on the margins of obsolescence"<sup>2</sup>.

The growth of nationalism in India in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was a historic need to get rid of the foreign yoke. As Eric Hobsbawm says "I do not regard the nation as primary nor an unchanging social entity. It belongs exclusively to a particular and historically recent period."<sup>3</sup> The evil effects of nationalism became apparent to the world during the world wars. Rabindranath Tagore had started warning India and other nations where the dangers of nationalism were becoming visible right in its beginning. Amitav Ghosh inherits the internationalism and universalism of Tagore and believes in the same notions.

*The Shadow Lines* is a contemporary text inspired by the memories of Ghosh's experiences of the killings in New Delhi in 1984 after Indira Gandhi's assassination. It interrogates and militates against the recent glorification of the idea of nationhood and easy assumptions of national divide. As Survir Kaul says "the novel is, for the most part, an extremely self-conscious meditation on the themes of nationality, internationality, cultural and historical self-determination, as also on the enormously conflicted transition from the temporary certitudes of the nationalist freedom struggle to the disillusion and discontents that have marked India as an independent state"<sup>4</sup>.

To Alka Kumar "The text continuously subverts notions of truth – notions that are rooted in cultural, sociological and historical realities while it exposes the arbitrariness of many kinds of lines, borders both personal and political"<sup>5</sup>. The Narrator's grandmother is a fervent nationalist, identifies herself completely

with the cause of nation. In her young days, she was surrounded by atmosphere when the enthusiasm to get one's freedom filled the youth with the dedication to sacrifice anything, going even to the extent of getting killed or killing the enemy. Her dedication to nation defines her every action never giving her any scope to allow any kind of self-indulgence. She believed after independence the political division and borders have made them safe within their own country. Her mind is filled with the European notions of nation building so when Ila decides to live in London, she objects "she doesn't belong there. It took those people a long time to build that country; hundreds of years, years and years of year and bloodshed. Everyone who lives there has earned his right to be there with blood. They know they're a nation because they've drawn their borders with blood. Hasn't Maya told you how regimental flags hang in their cathedral and how all their churches are lined with memorials to men who died in wars, all around the world? War is their religion. That's what it takes to make a country. Once that happens people forget they were born this or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi: they become a family born of the same pool of blood"<sup>6</sup>.

Grandmother's notion of nationalism is grounded on the belief that the real borders separate so she is taken aback when she faces the reality "But if there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, where is the difference then? And if there's no difference both sides will be the same; it will be just like it used to be before, when we used to catch a train in Dhaka and get off in Calcutta the next day without anybody stopping us. What was it all for then--partition and all the killing and everything—if there isn't something in between?"<sup>7</sup>

The Dhaka visit explodes various myths of Grandmother about nationalism. Her concern to protect her Uncle and bring him to the safety of their own nation forgetting all her lifetime feuds with her Uncle's family and she executes her plan to save the old man dying alone in a country not his own. "It doesn't matter whether we recognise each other or not. We're the same flesh, the same blood, the same bone, and now at last, after all these years, perhaps we'll be able to make amends for all that bitterness and hatred."<sup>8</sup> The old man, however, refuses and says "I don't believe in this India-Shindia. It's all very well, you're going away now, but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to? No one will have you anywhere. As for me, I was born here, and I'll die here"<sup>9</sup>.

Though her false notion of nationalism brings her the greatest disaster imaginable – The killings of her uncle and nephew – she fails to understand that the destruction was caused by her illusions. The accident makes her all the more baffled. She almost loses her mental balance and donates her gold chain, a memento of her dead husband and almost a part of her body – for the war fund. "I gave it away, she screamed. I gave it to the fund for the war. I had to, don't you see? For your sake; for your freedom. We have to kill them before they kill us; we have to wipe them out. She began to pound on the radio with both hands"<sup>10</sup>.

Tridib aptly describes grandmother, "All she wanted was a middle-class life in which, like the middle classes the world over, she would thrive believing in the unity of nationhood and territory, of self-respect and nation power: that was all she wanted – a modern middle class life, a small things that history has denied her in its fullness and for which she could never forgive it."<sup>11</sup>

As for the younger generation, who have inherited a free nation, such devotion to the nation is unimaginable. Ila, Robi and the narrator want to lead their lives in an individualistic manner and are surrounded by their own notions of truth. If free-

dom for the nation was grandmother's chief concern, Ila wants to be free of the constricted Indian milieu. Robi's refusal to allow Ila to dance with a stranger infuriates her, angrily she screams to the narrator that she wanted to be "free of your bloody culture"<sup>12</sup>. Ironically, she is rejected and brutally beaten in the land of her dreams. Grandmother's aversion to Ila is due to her acceptance of western lifestyle and the fear of her grandson's getting trapped in her influence, she calls her 'a slut'. So entrapped Ila is in her misguided notions of truth that she pretends to the narrator of having many relations in order to impress and shock him. Wearing the garb of a superficial cosmopolitan Ila's assumption of getting male gaze by pretentious permissiveness is contrary to Indian ethos where girls chastity has been revered for ages and honour killings are still so frequent. To quote Virginia Woolf 'Chastity had then, it has even now a religious importance for women's life'<sup>13</sup>. The irony is that, as she admits, whereas she herself remains as chaste as any other girl, she has to tolerate Nick's adulterous lifestyle. So, Ila's attempt to break free from her roots, in her effort to free herself, brings her a more destructive bondage. Robi, who wanted to get free from the past memories of his brother's brutal murder, feels the whole concept of freedom is a mirage. Intolerance in the name of freedom, caused killings in various parts of the country and he wonders "And then I think to myself why don't they draw thousands of little lines through the whole sub-continent and give every little place a new name? What would it change?"<sup>14</sup>

The novel stresses the role of memory, juxtaposes it with received history and exposes the fictive nature of history and also how the historical records try to erase what is recorded in the private memories of the people. The mature narrator who had grown up believing in the 'reality of nations and borders' during his research project, is horrified to find a link of his uncle Tridib's killing in Dhaka with a Calcutta riot of his childhood days.

Then begins the narrator's desperate search to recover a past so vividly imprinted in his memory and the facts leave him stunned and baffled. He wonders at the sensible people "They had drawn their borders, believing in that pattern, in the enchantment of lines, hoping perhaps that they had etched their borders upon the map, the two bits of land would sail away from each other like the shifting tectonic plates of prehistoric Gondwanaland."<sup>15</sup>

Strange enough that never before in history the places known as Dhaka and Calcutta were nearer to each other than after drawing the lines. Other startling fact was that even though the number of people killed in the riots was not less than the number of people killed in the war of 1962, the mention of riots has no place in the public memory. "By the end of January, 1964 the riots had faded away from the pages of newspapers, disappeared from the collective imagination of 'responsible opinion', vanished, without leaving a trace in the histories and bookshelves. They had dropped out of memory into the crater of a volcano of silence."<sup>16</sup> And he realizes "The theatre of war, where generals meet, is the stage on which the state disport themselves: they have no use for the memories of riots."<sup>17</sup>

The narrator after going through a lot of documentary records is able to find the deliberate efforts of some self-interested groups to give a tinge of communal riots to the initially peaceful demonstrations by the members of all religions – Hindu, Sikhs and Muslims – after the loss of relic in Hazrat Bal Shrine in Kashmir – the similar reason giving spur to riots in Dhaka and Calcutta. In spite of the violence during the riots depicting a 'pathological inversion', some sensible people also displayed "that indivisible sanity that binds people to each other independently of their governments"<sup>18</sup>. As Meenakshi Mukherji observes "the chronicles of nations are interrogated in this novel by highlighting on the one hand the reality of the fiction people create around their lives, and on the other hand by recoding verifiable graphic details of individual memories that do not necessarily tally with the received version of history"<sup>19</sup>.

## CONCLUSION:

Despite being aware of the Utopian nature of Tridib's desire to become a global citizen- a man without country – as the death of that visionary hints, succumbing to the brute forces of reality, the novel hints at the legacy of such people – the imaginative vision.

Tridib's insistence on using the imagination with precision and his early warning that we would not be free of other people's inventions until 'we invent our own stories' properly helps the maturing narrator to investigate the reality and truth of other stories and invent his own.

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